# The Husking

*A Story from Granger's Hollow*

By Ervin Kosch

Dale Marsh found Milton Kruger at six in the morning, standing barefoot in the north forty with his mouth open and his arms out like a scarecrow nobody had asked for.

"Milt?" Dale called. The corn was tall that July, taller than it had any right to be, the leaves a wet unnatural green. "Milt, you'll cut your feet on the stubble."

Milton didn't turn. He didn't blink. Where the morning light caught his neck, Dale saw something that didn't belong there—a ridge of pale yellow, like a kernel of corn pressing up from under the skin.

Dale walked home and didn't tell anybody for two days.

By the end of the week, four more people in Granger's Hollow were standing in fields at dawn.

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They called it the Sway. Nobody called it zombification, not out loud, because that was a word from movies and this was Iowa, and in Iowa you did not get to be dramatic about things that grew in the dirt.

The first sign was the eyes: a slow greasing-over, amber and dull, like a cornsilk stain soaked into the iris. Then the husk-fibers, soft and pale, threading up under the fingernails and along the tender skin of the inner elbow. Then the silence—they stopped answering when you spoke, stopped seeming to hear. They wandered. They swayed. They drifted, always south, always toward the tallest rows.

The last stage, nobody liked to talk about. Esther Calloway had rooted. Her husband found her at the edge of the south field, her feet gone soft and dark, splitting into pale

tendrils that had pushed a full foot down into the soil. She was breathing. Her eyes were open. She was, in some technical and unbearable sense, alive.

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Dr. Lena Vasquez arrived on a Tuesday with a van full of grad students and a portable PCR machine. She was a mycologist out of Ames, fifty-two, with sharp dark eyes and a habit of talking to herself when she was thinking, which was always. The county had begged. BexterCorp, whose new biohybrid corn had been planted across eighty percent of the county that spring, had not returned any calls.

"My working hypothesis," Lena told the town meeting, "is a mutant strain of Fusarium. Possibly symbiotic with the BexterCorp root system. We'll need soil samples, blood samples, and your patience."

Dale Marsh, sitting in the back row with his granddaughter Maya, said, "It's the corn."

"We don't know that, Mr. Marsh."

"It's the goddamn corn."

Lena looked at him the way she looked at anyone who confused certainty with evidence. Dale looked away. Maya, sixteen, did not look away. Maya had her grandfather's stubbornness and her grandmother's field journal, and she had been writing things down.

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Maya met Theo on the third day, behind the church where the scientists had set up a makeshift lab. He was seventeen, lanky, with his mother's sharp eyes and a stolen keycard to the PCR machine.

"You're the Iowa State kid," Maya said.

"You're the one who keeps leaving soil samples on the porch."

"They're from my grandma's patch. The heritage corn. Two acres, never touched BexterCorp seed, never has."

Theo frowned. "Why do you keep bringing them?"

Maya opened her journal. She had mapped it. Every person who had Swayed had either worked the BexterCorp fields or lived downhill of the runoff. Every person who worked the heritage patch—three old women and a man with one leg—was fine.

Theo took the journal. He read it twice. He said a word his mother would not have approved of.

"She won't listen," he said. "She's locked into the Fusarium model. She thinks it's genetic susceptibility."

"It's the dirt," Maya said. "Or something in the dirt."

"The soil microbiome." Theo was already thinking out loud. "If the heritage patch has a bacterial colony that outcompetes whatever's colonizing the roots—"

"Then the people who tended it are protected."

"Then we can culture it."

They looked at each other. They were sixteen and seventeen and they had both, separately, watched someone they loved go still and amber and walk out into the corn.

"Can you actually run the test?" Maya asked.

"I can run it tonight."

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Lena's hypothesis was elegant and wrong. The Fusarium was there, but it was a passenger, not a driver. The driver was a novel bacterial endosymbiont engineered into the BexterCorp root stock—designed to fix nitrogen, it had instead, in the silty loam of Granger's Hollow, found a second host: people.

Theo ran the cultures at two in the morning. Maya labeled the trays. The heritage-patch soil killed the endosymbiont dead in six hours, every plate, every dilution. A strain of Bacillus, common as dirt, except it had evolved a chemical warfare compound specific to the engineered bacteria.

They had the cure.

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The adults did not want to hear it.

Lena said the methodology was sloppy. Dale said it was too simple—nothing was ever that simple, and besides, what did two kids know. The county emergency manager said they could not make public-health decisions based on a teenager's journal. The BexterCorp lawyer, who had finally arrived, said the data was contaminated and anyway, correlation was not causation.

Maya stood at the back of the town hall and felt the anger rise in her like the green of the corn, tall and unstoppable.

She thought: They will talk until we are all rooted.

She thought: I have to make them hear.

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On Thursday they did the only thing they could think of. Theo smuggled a culture out of the lab. Maya brought a sprayer from her grandfather's barn. They walked, in the last orange light, to the south field where Esther Calloway had rooted three weeks before and was still, somehow, breathing.

Esther's husband had built her a little shelter of tarps and bedsheets, so the crows wouldn't get her. Maya knelt in the dirt beside her and sprayed the culture, thin and even, across the pale tendrils of her feet and the husk-fibers of her wrists. She sprayed her own hands afterward, just in case.

They sat with her all night.

At dawn, Esther Calloway opened her eyes and they were brown, and she said, "Water," in a voice like a door opening after a long winter.

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By noon the town hall was full and Lena was crying and Dale Marsh was holding his granddaughter's hand so hard his knuckles were white and the BexterCorp lawyer was on the phone with somebody very important and not getting through.

They brewed the culture in the high-school chemistry lab and they sprayed every field, and every person, and they lost some—Esther's husband had rooted too deep and

could not be pulled—but they saved most, and by September the corn was cut and the amber was going out of people's eyes.

Maya kept the journal. Theo went back to Ames with his mother and started a real study. Dale Marsh planted the heritage seed in the north forty and never bought BexterCorp again.

And on the last page of her journal, in October, Maya wrote: It wasn't the corn. It was that nobody believed the dirt until the dirt told them itself.

Then she closed the book, and she did not look at the small pale ridge that had begun, just that morning, to press up under the thumbnail of her left hand.